DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 359 553 CS 213 945

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TITLE The Composition Teacher as Drudge: The Pitfalls and Perils of Linking across the Disciplines.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (44th, San Diego, CA, March 31-April 3, 1993).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Faculty; Faculty Development; Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Interprofessional Relationship; *Writing Across the Curriculum; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues; Faculty Status

ABSTRACT

While the objectives of linking-across-the-curriculum may be laudable, the program as it has evolved only serves to perpetuate every existing stereotype about the place of composition in the curriculum and the role of the composition instructor in the academic setting. Instead of providing an arena in which students encounter shared knowledge between disciplines, it reinforces their perception that the so-called "content courses" are the "important" ones, and that composition is a necessary but tangential aspect of learning. It also puts the composition instructors back in their accustomed place: as Cinderellas who sit among the ashes while the content instructors go to the ball. Many content area instructors, unconsciously or consciously, encourage students in this attitude. They often view the composition teacher as a kind of superior copy editor, and the composition course as a dumping ground for whatever the content area instructors feel needs addressing. What needs to change is the mindset of the composition faculty as a whole. Composition faculty may be able to effect change simply by refusing to participate until the fundamental relationship between content and composition courses is restructured--either with real integration of two divergent disciplines, or by linking with their own content courses. (SR)

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THE COMPOSITION TEACHER AS DRUDGE:

The Pitfalls and Perils of Linking across the Disciplines

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While the objectives of linking-across-the curriculum may be laudable, the program, as it has evolved, only serves to perpetuate every existing stereotype about the place of composition in the curriculum and the role of the composition instructor in the academic setting. Instead of providing an arena in which students encounter the shared knowledge between disciplines, it reinforces their perception that the so-called "content courses" are not only the only "important" ones, but also puts the composition instructors back in their accustomed place: as Cinderellas who sit among the ashes while the content instructors go to the ball. The roles of all three major actors in this drama contribute to this perception.

In nearly twenty years of teaching, I have encountered more times than I care to remember the frustration of having students who show up for my classes empty-handed with a litany of excuses: "I had to study for my biology midterm;" "I had a paper due in political science;" "I had a lab practicum in anatomy this morning;" "I

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had to do a field observation in sociology." When I suggest that they ought to be telling their other instructors, "I couldn't do my paper for criminal justice because I have to present a draft of my paper for my workshop in my comp class," they sometimes evidence a modicum of embarrassment, but mostly they laugh. Their general perception, which is reinforced, I'm sure, by the instructors in their "real" courses is that composition is, at best, a necessary but tangential aspect of learning.

As the linked-course program is set up, many content area instructors, unconsciously or consciously, encourage students in this type of attitude. While they give lip service to the importance of composition, they actually view the composition instructor as law firms do associates or even law clerks. The composition teacher is responsible for making sure that the papers turned in for the senior partner satisfy their own 4Cs requirement: clear, coherent, concise, and most of all correct. The composition teacher becomes a kind of superior copy editor. Content area instructors, apologies to those present, are always very enthusiastic about the finished writing they get from students in their courses. One speech communication professor could not praise me enough since our linked students had all turned in first drafts of their papers on animal communication. "Mary Anne is really doing a wonderful job with these students. I've always encouraged students to show me drafts of their papers, but not until this link did very many of them

bother to do so." While I like to think my students are doing a wonderful job in their writing classroom, what this professor didn't acknowledge was that the drafts he saw were the drafts my students always write. Another political science professor will only link with one composition instructor simply because she does proofread every research paper for the students in their linked courses. When he found himself linked with another instructor for one semester, their partnership disintegrated into acrimony when she tried to explain that she didn't see her role as handmaiden to the high priest of political science.

This prevailing attitude manifests itself in other ways as well. Since composition courses have no content, to anyone who has never taught one at least, they frequently become the dumping grounds for anything and everything the director of the Freshman Year Initiative decides the program needs to address. Two years ago the program was focusing on "shared experiences," such as a trip to an exhibit called "Harvest of Pride," which detailed the history of migrant workers in upstate New York. "Of course," the professor my composition classes were linked with announced, "your class would be the ideal place for them to discuss their reactions. You can have them reflect on their experiences in their journals. " Last year the emphasis was multiculturism, a topic which should lend itself to discussion in almost any class, "but, of course, since we content area instructors have so much material to cover, you composition people will have the time to deal with it."

Maxine Hairston once described literature faculty as "mandarins." Decked out in embroidered gowns, long fingernails, and bound feet, they see themselves as far superior to their composition colleagues with their big feet and short fingernails who exist solely to serve their masters and do the chores the mandarins disdain. The same analogy, I suggest, applies to the content instructors in this linked-course format. We "composition people" exist solely to "improve" students' writing so that these students are better writers of political science, biology, chemistry, criminal justice, accounting, occupational therapy papers. At a recent conference in Washington, D.C., Judy Grappa related the lament of one part-time composition instructor, "The full-time faculty are the masters of the plantation. We are the mammies who are intrusted with the babies and the silver, but we still belong to them." The same analogy describes the relationship of content instructors to composition faculty. What we actually do in comp classes isn't important, and thus can be easily shoved to the background of our own syllabi at the whim of the "important" stuff. Whenever it is suggested that perhaps they might incorporate critical thinking, writing-to-learn, freewriting, clustering, or any composition techniques into their courses to help their students encounter difficult and complex issues, the cry is always, "But I have <u>real</u> material I have to cover."

But the fault is not really theirs; they are not going to change. To paraphrase Maxine Hairston again, they are like dinosaurs sitting

around waiting for the weather to change. The inherent problems in the linked courses result from the failure of the composition instructor to value composition as a discipline. We are either all too content to accept their judgments about the relative value of composition ("as a service course" as it is referred to at our institution) or we view, as Mary Ann does, our activities in our classroom as a subversive activity ("let them think it is the mother of all nerd classes; that gives me the opportunity to do what I want") or we content ourselves, as I find myself doing far too often, with complaining about our treatment when we're back in the slave quarters at night.

"You don't," as Audre Lord wrote, "tear down the master's house with the master's tools." For linked-courses across the disciplines to be successful, what needs to change is the mindset of the composition faculty as a whole. We are all too willing to complain about the way "they" drive; we are less willing to take the wheel ourselves. Our students can only value our discipline if we value it ourselves. Our students will continue to see us as drudges if we can't effect a fundamental transformation in the way we see ourselves and our discipline. If we are to tear down the master's house, and to invite our students to join in, we need to forge our own tools, and we can't begin to do that until we realize that we have the ability to do so.

Fortunately, this system like so many similar systems has within it the seeds of its own destruction. First of all, if the program's goal of linking half the total number of composition sections offered at the institution is to have any hope of being reached, composition teachers have to be willing to teach in it. Currently, that isn't happening. Many remain skeptical; many others, like myself, drop out after a semester or two. If the program is to succeed, then it seems we may actually be able to effect change simply by refusing to participate until the fundamental relationship between content and composition courses is restructured--either to a format where there is a real integration of two divergent disciplines in both classes or to a format, which I am considering proposing, in which composition instructors--who at our school always teach "something else'--link with themselves. If we can control the content, as well as the context, then we won't have to tear down the master's house; we can build our own.